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ABSTRACT

This retrospective paper highlights pedagogical approaches that best engaged at risk middle school (sixth grade) males at a private school that opened in St. Petersburg, Florida, in 1997, the year after civil disturbances there made national news. Because of the "treachery" of students' neighborhoods and the isolationist policy of many families, their poverty included a lack of cultural sustenance. Initially, most of the students did not understand conventional interpretations of literature read. However, with enhanced understandings of perspective, drama and language; with opportunities for identification with characters in reading, and with a community leadership initiative, their interpretive skills increased alongside their self-esteem and character growth. Pedagogical approaches included: (1) asking students how they would change the world if they could; (2) using the story "The Blind Men and the Elephant" to introduce perspective and to foster a discussion on trust and dialogue; (3) writing a performance script in collaboration with a troupe of local actors to introduce students to interpersonal communication and argument resolution; (4) refraining from yelling at students; (5) emphasizing meaning in grammar instruction and teaching students to examine texts for word choice; (6) utilizing community involvement to foster leadership; and (7) providing literary characters with whom students identify. Contains 10 references. (EF)

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by Gin Kohl

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Virtue Ethics and the Teaching of Language Arts

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Kenneth Burke once wrote, "Any country can be branded as gross until its last slums are removed and their paupers are not given mere sustenance but the cultural equivalents of sustenance" (P & C, p. 213). While he views literature as "equipment for living," others have stressed its importance in the development of empathy.

Many contemporary theorists have abandoned deontological and utilitarian approaches to moral behavior and, like Burke, focus on the agent rather than the act. Consequently, language arts classes provide an ideal forum for the deliberation and understanding of character, the centerpiece of Virtue Ethics.

This retrospective paper highlights pedagogical approaches that best engaged "at risk" middle school males at a private school that opened in south St. Petersburg in 1997, the year after civil disturbances there made national news. Because of the treachery of the students' neighborhoods and the isolationist policy of many families, their poverty included a lack of "the cultural equivalents of sustenance." Initially, most of them "missed" conventional interpretations of the literature we read. However, with enhanced understandings of perspective, drama and language; opportunities for identification with characters in reading, and a community leadership initiative, their interpretive skills have increased alongside their self-esteem and growth in character.

prologue

What I know about communication needs of "at risk" students I have learned from my continuing work with a group of middle school males, who are now eighth graders at Academy Prep, in south St. Petersburg, FL. I began working with them as sixth graders in 1997 when the private school opened—less than a year after the civil disturbances in their neighborhood made national news. Since their first year, when I volunteered to take over the responsibilities of teaching both language arts and a course in reading and speech when their teacher abruptly quit, I have maintained a presence in the school,

working alongside my co-author, Sidney Kirkpatrick. Both Sidney and I aspire to the calling of the school's African-American co-founder, Bob Anders: "We don't want teachers seeking to change the world; we want teachers that will enable these boys to change the world."

Armed with an appreciation of such authors as Martin Buber (1965, 1970) and Kenneth Burke (1984) from our Communication canon and Bernard Mayo (Timmons, ed., 1995) from moral theory, I accepted Anders' challenge. Sidney subsequently accepted the challenge when he joined the faculty in the school's second year: Together we were mutually armed with an appreciation of Paulo Freire's (1971) *Pedagogy of the oppressed*.

The first obstacles I encountered were twofold: "How can you foster a sense of self-esteem in these students who "fail" by conventional standards so that they can contribute to societal change," and "Can I be effective as a teacher modeling character amidst the background noise of other teachers, constantly yelling at these boys?"

Further complicating matters was my awareness that, unlike in "non-at-risk" student populations where a teacher can count on the brightest students to reinforce her efforts at modeling character, my brightest students were also the least socially savvy. Both grew up in the same housing project; one was instructed to lock himself in immediately after school everyday and do his homework until his mother arrived home late at night from work, while the other was imprisoned with the child-care responsibilities of attending to his three-year-old brother and two-year-old nephew after school.

A *logistical* answer I found to the first obstacle phrased as the question, "How do you foster self-esteem," was to grade their work objectively but to additionally address their

evaluations subjectively and one-on-one. Even when a student "failed" an assignment or test, I took the time to qualitatively cluster both what the student had *not* mastered, and what he *had* successfully mastered; we then talked about what he needed to concentrate on for mastery. I found the process as one of building trust as well as of fostering self-esteem. Also, when evaluating writing assignments, I would give separate grades for the thoughts that went into the assignment and the grammatical correctness of the students' expression.

Beyond these logistical solutions, I sought a pedagogy that would give meaning to the word *educare*, "to draw out." Some educators refer to "at-risk" students as "reluctant learners." I disagree that they are reluctant learners; however I would agree that they can be reluctant *readers* because many can not read well, and reluctant *writers* and *speakers* because what they say as marginalized members of age, class and race-related groups, is seldom heard or legitimated.

Because my approach to teaching was centered around legitimately implementing a sense of self-esteem in my students, the question of "Can I be effective as a teacher modeling character amidst the background noise of other teachers, constantly yelling at these boys?" dissipated over time. Consequently, the heart of this presentation highlights what worked for me, and for Sidney, in attempts to equip our boys with a secure sense of self, fortified with language skills that hopefully will enable them to "change the world" through active participation in the world.

gleanings

(1) Mid-year, I asked the sixth-graders how they would change the world if they could. Their answers were equally divided between eradicating racism and violence.

Borrowing from Marshall McLuhan (1967), "Where student interest is already intensely focused is the natural point at which to be in the elucidation of other problems and interests. The educational task is not only to provide basic tools of perception, but to develop judgment and discrimination with ordinary social experience." I began with providing them readings on the topics of hate, racism and violence to counter their reluctance to read, speak and write. Also, the readings I provided them from newspaper editorials and the Southern Poverty Law Center's periodical, *Intelligence Report*, served to augment their social experience with tools for judgment, discrimination and veracity. In concert, reluctant readers, speakers and writers became avid readers for the purpose of becoming more eloquent and informed speakers and writers.

(2) The story of *The Blind Men and the Elephant* was instrumental in introducing "perspective" and respect for the perspectives of others. From the first day's introduction and into our third year, Paul has drawn a large elephant on the chalkboard. In first telling them the story, I literally stood point blank in front of one section of the elephant, asking them how the blind man (by means of feel) *there* would describe the elephant from my particular position at the board—from his perspective. I then asked them how the blind men, collectively, could ever *see* a whole elephant. Their answers fostered a discussion on trust and dialogue.

Beyond my initial purpose of telling the story, I have asked Paul to draw his elephant on the board many times. In terms of perspective and self-esteem, I have encouraged "reluctant writers" in expository writing, exposing only what they, as unique human beings, can see. In terms of reading literature, we have better

understood that *all* authors have a point-of-view. In terms of identifying opposing traits and tensions within a story, we have listed them on the "heads and tails" sides of the elephant. A particularly good short story for this exercise is one by Harriet Beecher Stowe, "The Minister's Housekeeper" which we read in preparation for *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (although it was written twenty years later). From the title, it is apparent that neither the minister nor the housekeeper are the tellers of this story; the title suggests a focus on the housekeeper, and her cousin narrates the story from his perspective. Written in dialect, the story is one of human love that blossomed amidst and despite categories of rich-poor, old-young and educated-uneducated.

(3) As related to elements of dramatic tension and dialectics, local actors from *American Stage* came to the school over the course of several weeks and helped the students, in pairs of two, write a script for their performance. In the process of writing their scripts, the students learned such Burkean basics as the importance of the scene in determining what makes sense for the characters to say and do, and the roles of protagonist and antagonist for the creation of drama. Additionally, they employed the use of body language into their performances quite naturally.

They learned how easy it was to write the protagonist-antagonist script but also learned some basics of interpersonal communication: They realized a drama couldn't just be a fight or an argument; there had to be some point to the story, a common ground. In terms of interpersonal communication, they learned the limitation of escalating symmetry and that occasionally each character needs to complement the words spoken by the other. Without introducing them to the words used in our field, they were introduced to the principle. Consequently, whenever an argument was

threatening to get out of hand between two students, a simple "Sounds like the scripts you guys were writing" often was enough to defuel their disagreement.

The performance lesson learned regarding body language didn't come early enough in the year for many of the students, who had from time to time gotten into trouble using it but insisting they hadn't *said* anything. From my perspective, most of them were justified in being angered over misunderstandings, typically stemming from who (still) had the forum to speak. Following a misunderstanding, a teacher would boom, "Who said you could talk?" and a student would slouch down in his desk, jerk his body sideways and get into even more trouble. It was unfortunate from a speech standpoint because such students were actively and enthusiastically engaged in the subject matter. I counseled them to see that their body language doesn't *say* what would be in their best interests to say: "I misunderstood. Because you had 'called on me,' I thought I still had permission to speak. I was just responding to your comments following mine."

(4) As foreshadowed in the previous section, the school was significantly authoritarian in nature, deviating substantially from the other Jesuit schools after which it was modeled—specifically Nativity Mission in New York's Lower East Side. Recent research (Zellman and Waterman, 1998) reports that a parenting style of "high warmth and low negativity" is the most effective indicator of a child's success in school, and that authoritarian styles of "high clarity and high negativity" hinder a child's success. It stands to reason that the same can be said of teaching styles.

Martin Buber (and Carl Rogers) said as much. Buber (1965) addressed the subject at great length. He essentially says that education is education of character;

the word "character" means "impression," and it is the task of an educator to participate in her students' lives in order to gain their confidence and trust. Without such trust, an educator will not have added her own positive impression to a child's formation of character—what Buber called "the interpenetration of all those multifarious, opposing influences" (p. 106). Further roles of an educator, according to Buber, are to model successful strategies of conflict resolution, to acknowledge and share one's own perspective and to "awaken in young people the courage to shoulder life" (p. 115), with responsibility to community. Buber viewed devotion to authority within a collective as an unconscious escape from personal action and responsibility.

With regard to this section, there were times when individual students asked me about my perspectives on life: "Are you a Christian" and "Why don't you yell?" To the latter I sometimes responded that it's against my religion—I'm not a Christian but a Unitarian-Universalist and a humanist. I further explained that yelling is contagious—a person yelled at is likely to yell at the next person who approaches him. I additionally explained to Vasjah who commented, "You'd make a good principal except for that you can't yell." I corrected him by saying I *can* yell but I choose not to. And I told him about my then-sixteen-year-old son who had grown to be a foot taller than me and whose voice was now louder and deeper than mine—that because I hadn't yelled at my own son, I asked, why should I yell at them? Vasjah was astute in making associations. He talked about the fallacy of "might makes right" and how I didn't want my son growing up to yell at his children and my grandchildren.

In asking about my religion, they knew that whatever god was operative in my life was unlike the "God" running the school's detention, called JUG—Jurisdiction Under God. Of course, God as moral authority never administered jurisprudence in after-school detention.

(5) With a lively "reading and speech" class taught in addition to a "language arts" class, a challenge was to put life and action into the teaching of basically grammar during language arts time. Borrowing from Burke and his value-laden approach to grammar, we gave emphasis to the "art" in language arts: By altering a single subject or verb within a sentence, the sentence's meaning was changed. Middle school males love action, so we began with verbs. (Besides, except for interjections, other one-word sentences contain only a verb with the understood subject, "you"—another reason to begin with verbs.)

For instance, "The man *talked* to the group" became "The man *preached* to the group, and—after adjustments were made for the noun that was the subject of the sentence, and the noun that was the object of the preposition—later became "The *minister preached* to the *congregation.* Derived from the same basic sentence were also statements like "The *lawyer appealed* to the *jurors.* In these cases, the value-laden verb choice colored the perception of the speaker and to whom he was likely speaking. We later did the same kind of exercise, substituting another noun for the sentence's subject (learning with Georg Simmel the difference between a perceived crowd and a mob).

Beyond enriching the students' own compositions, the exercise enabled us to examine the compositions of others in their choice of words. We read opinion

columns from the newspaper and looked for persuasive words. One column was written by Bill Maxwell (who had visited our class several times) of the *St. Petersburg Times* about the economic prospects of their neighborhood following the opening of Tropicana Field. In addition to the words in his eloquent column I imagined the students would identify, Marcus objected to his choice of the word, "loitering" as descriptive of the actions of men in the area. Marcus insisted that they were just "chillin'." Later, Bill instructed him that the kind of "chillin'" he was writing about was against the law and had the more correct name, "loitering."

Teaching students to examine texts for word choice enables them to discern the attitudes and objectives of some of the most anonymous of authors—authors of textbooks, particularly history and other social studies textbooks. They laughed when I asked them who they thought got to write about a war, the winners of the losers. Everyone understood that the would-be *hero* of the losers is portrayed as the *villain* by the winners.

Sidney Kirkpatrick's is now the voice of the "I."

(6) Educators who actively participate in the lives of their students and engage other significant adults from their community in the creation of community leadership opportunities, academic "carrots" and various extrinsic motivations to glorify achievement, increase effective leadership among adolescents. There are various ways to agitate, stimulate and create a desire to lead from a youth's perspective: One way is to increase the amount of time he spends with issues relevant to his neighborhood.

During my class one afternoon last spring, I introduced my students to the concept of "The Thunderbeings" and the story of *The Spirit Wakinyan*. The Lakota Indians are known for having special values and beliefs, and the term "thunderbeing" is derived from their belief that every living being has the potential to become a leader of the tribe or community.

I used this idea to ignite the dormant spirit within the hearts of my students, in hopes that they would become community-conscious activists, like the Lakota's, "standing for all things right and pure." With an innate enthusiasm and a desire for positive change in their communities, the students were extremely excited at the possibilities awaiting them. Armed with pencils and "Thunderbeing" interview kits, made from recycled paper and held together with yarn, we took to the streets to obtain first hand information from the residents in the community-at-large. The information they gathered from the residents' comments about drugs, crime and filth proved that their energies could be put to use immediately.

As a result of these interviews, the students had gathered names, telephone numbers, addresses and drafted a list of community projects for their attention to community upliftment. Additionally, two students interviewed a widow, who hadn't had her lawn cut since her husband died two years ago. Because of the relationship that was established between her and the students, they volunteered to cut this concerned resident's lawn twice a month at no charge.

The "Thunderbeing" concept has empowered these students with values, morals and a sense of ownership in their communities, which in turn breeds a sense of leadership and responsibility. They see, first hand, how community activism can

build leaders: in developing relationships with adults who are willing to endow them with wisdom, they can become more effective leaders.

(7) Another technique to increase the leadership abilities of adolescents is to expose them to various books and journals containing characters with whom they can identify, thereby motivating and stimulating their consciousness and conscientiousness. One such book is Nathan McCall's *Makes Me Wanna Holler.* This book inspired several of my students to introspectively look at themselves and ask if their lives are being used for the purpose of good.

One student, Paul, was motivated to enter an oratorical contest after reading McCall's book and realizing he had some things to change about his character. His spoken essay, "Optimism in My Life," won the regional award for the International Optimist Club Junior Oratorical Annual Contest. Paul became the first African-American male to win this prestigious award: his passion for positive change and his commitment for solving social ills motivated the judges in their selection of his speech.

Reading *Makes Me Wanna Holler* was instrumental in the students' understanding of how the decisions and choices they make now can dictate how they will live their lives in the future, not only for the African-Americans in the class, but for the only white male in the school, too: He learned that his mother, like Nathan McCall, had made some unfortunate choices which continue to dominate her life, and subsequently challenge his.

epilogue

Sidney adds, "I am extremely excited about future projects geared toward endowing, empowering, and engaging young adults with the necessary tools for a life of leadership in positive change for the sake of humanity."

I enlisted Sidney's co-authorship of this paper last February after my abstract for this panel was accepted for NCA presentation, and when I was "tapped" to co-author a federal GEAR-UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) proposal for a partnership between USF and a public school in a neighboring county with a population of students similar to Academy Prep's.

I immediately felt a camaraderie with Sidney upon meeting him; he continues to teach "Reading & Speech" to the sixth-graders—now eighth-graders—I came to know in the school's first year. He is the kind of individual to whom I could easily "pass the baton" from that first year. Also, I believed what he was bringing to his classroom fortified the basics of my proposed abstract at a time when my presence at the school was challenged by my responsibilities as a grant proposal writer. Besides, why *shouldn't he* be a co-author?

In comparing the student populations served by Academy Prep and the public school, Franklin Middle, for which USF was granted a GEAR-UP award, they are immensely similar in their racial distribution and numbers of children in poverty: 61% of the students at Franklin are African-Americans, 18% are Hispanics and 92% qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. In contrasting the amount of freedom and

opportunity an educator has in addressing the students of these populations, the differences are staggering. For instance: Although Academy Prep participates in the CTBS and Florida Writes testing of its students, Franklin Middle is further saddled with "scope and sequence" regimens throughout its curriculum and county-wide testing of that regimen at particular intervals. In other words, there's little space for teachers to be innovative in a public school as we have been in a private school. And although many Franklin teachers enjoy an 18:1 student-teacher ratio, the once 13:1 ratio at Academy Prep is now 9:1 due to expulsions, retentions and elective withdrawals.

Regardless, we think that many of our strategies are relevant to the pedagogical aims of reaching "at risk" middle school students and meeting their communication needs. Significantly, our students, on average, improved their standardized reading scores by nearly two and a half grade levels in one year. The contrasts regarding the amount of freedom and opportunity to reach these students should be a call to "color outside the lines" in ways that privatization alone cannot, or will neither augment nor contribute toward the betterment of public education.

In conclusion, I suggest that the wisdom of Janice Hale (1994) in *Unbank the Fire: Visions for the Education of African-American Children* be extended to include all children. She makes passing reference to the fact that white children are socialized to participate in our present educational system, which she describes as monotonous, static and culturally sterile; my question is *to what end.*

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